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DE RUEHKH #1367/01 2511433
ZNR UUUUU ZZH
O 071433Z SEP 08
FM AMEMBASSY KHARTOUM
TO RUEHC/SECSTATE WASHDC IMMEDIATE 1845
INFO RUCNIAD/IGAD COLLECTIVE
RHMFIISS/CJTF HOA

UNCLAS SECTION 01 OF 02 KHARTOUM 001367

DEPT FOR A/S FRAZER, SE WILLIAMSON, AF/SPG
NSC FOR PITTMAN AND HUDSON
DEPT PLS PASS USAID FOR AFR/SUDAN
ADDIS ABABA ALSO FOR USAU

SENSITIVE
SIPDIS

E.O. 12958: N/A

TAGS: PGOV PREL EAID EAGR KDEM AU UNSC SU

SUBJECT: BEJA CONGRESS LEADERS SEEK HUMANITARIAN AND DEVELOPMENT
AID, CAPACITY BUILDING ASSISTANCE

REF: A) KHARTOUM 701
B) KHARTOUM 1282
C) KHARTOUM 1202
D) KHARTOUM 1278

¶1. (SBU) Summary: On September 4, Beja Congress Executive Committee members requested USG capacity building and media training support as their organization transitions from an armed opposition movement to a civil political party. They echoed reports of impending famine in the East in the near future. Expressing appreciation for past USG humanitarian aid, they hoped that the USG would play a larger role in aid and development in the East going forward. CDA Fernandez welcomed the Beja Congress party's maturation, urged its leaders to build networks with other like-minded organizations across Sudan, noted USG hopes to establish a development program in the East, and encouraged the Beja Congress party to stay in close contact with the Embassy. End Summary.

¶2. (SBU) On September 4, members of the Beja Congress Executive Committee called on CDA Fernandez to brief him on the August 15 general conference of the Beja Congress in Erkowait and on the humanitarian and development needs of the East. They were Salah Barkwin, the Eastern Front Secretary of Kassala State whom CDA Fernandez met on May 4 in Kassala (Reftel A); Abdalla Musa, Member of the National Council and Beja Congress Spokesman; and Al-Amin Shingrai, who has spent much of the last decade in exile in the United States before returning to Sudan upon the signing of the Eastern Sudan Peace Agreement (ESPA).

"A NEW ERA" FOR BEJA CONGRESS PARTY

¶3. (SBU) Barkwin described the Beja Congress general conference in Erkowait as "very successful," noting that it was broadly attended not just by Beja but all groups of the East. Despite its name and historical roots, he characterized the Beja Congress as an inclusive party whose membership is open to all. He stated that while the Beja Congress is a member of the Government of National Unity (GNU) through the Eastern Front, it was not allied with the NCP. "We have our own views," stated Barkwin. "We are also allied with our old friends in the South, in Darfur, and in the North," referring to the Beja Congress' erstwhile allies in the now defunct umbrella opposition group National Democratic Alliance (NDA).

¶4. (SBU) CDA Fernandez agreed that party alliances are constructive and encouraged the Beja Congress to build networks with other like-minded organizations across Sudan. He asked whether an SPLM alliance with the DUP precludes one with the Eastern Front. Shingrai replied that this is to some extent true, given the historical animosity between the DUP and Beja Congress as both fight over the same geographic base.

¶5. (SBU) Echoing Eastern Front and Beja Congress Chairman Musa Mohamed Ahmed (Ref. B), Shingrai stated that the Beja Congress is

now in a "new era" as a civil political party after years as an armed opposition movement. "We must manage the struggle in a civil way," he said. Noting the Beja Congress' long history of good relations with the USG and Embassy Khartoum, he urged the USG to help the party with this transformation through capacity building and media training assistance. "We need to remake the party from what it was to what we want it to be," he said. CDA Fernandez stated that in advance of the 2009 elections, the USG remains focused on training and capacity building for democratic forces in Sudan, especially those representing marginalized people. He encouraged the Beja Congress to stay in close contact with the Embassy and work with like-minded organizations throughout Sudan.

ECHOING REPORTS OF FAMINE IN THE EAST

¶16. (SBU) The Beja Congress leaders expressed appreciation for humanitarian aid provided by the USG over the years, including the years of armed struggle. But they urged that the USG ramp up both humanitarian and development aid for the East. They echoed previous reports (Ref C) of a dire shortage of food in the region, notably in Kassala and Red Sea states. "The last harvest was very weak" due to a lack of rain, stated Barkwin, noting that the East also had to contend with the annual Gash River flash floods. He stated that the price of sorghum remains high, and while the State Government in Kassala tried to import sorghum from other parts of Sudan, the result was inadequate due to the state's limited financial resources. "It is not enough," he said. Shingrai declared that unless the international community provides food aid and the GOS declares a state of emergency, then "starvation is a probable consequence." They feared that the ruling NCP is downplaying the serious consequences of hunger in the East for political reasons.

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¶17. (SBU) CDA Fernandez agreed that it is an unfortunate reality that the East does not receive the attention it deserves. He characterized the humanitarian situation as a "slow motion crisis" that does not capture the attention of the world in the way as the Darfur conflict, or even the CPA. However, he added that USAID is seeking to establish a development program for Northern Sudan, including the East. This would be the first USG-funded development program in the East in many years. CDA Fernandez pointed out that improved relations with the GOS are a necessary prerequisite to increased development aid, as the regime has typically viewed outside involvement in Eastern Sudan with suspicion. He noted that on his trip to Kassala in May (Ref. A) all meetings with political parties were attended by a NISS representative, a level of monitoring not seen elsewhere in Sudan. Shingrai expressed hope that this might change, observing that "the regime has too many problems in Darfur and in the South, so we expect they won't give us a hard time."

Comment

¶18. (SBU) Unlike Dr. Amna Dirar, whose leadership challenge of Musa Mohamed Ahmed in the Eastern Front remains unresolved (Ref. D), the Beja Congress leadership does not seem to view membership in either organization as mutually exclusive. Rather, they seem to view the Eastern Front simply as a vehicle to promote the agenda of the Beja Congress. Whether either organization will be a force in the 2009 elections depends largely on whether they can successfully establish electoral alliances. An alliance with the SPLM would be intriguing, but is hampered by the SPLM's indecision as to whether it will mount a serious national election campaign against the NCP or make a deal with them. Post will continue to encourage such alliances and reach out to democratic forces in advance of the elections, especially those representing marginalized populations. Although reports of famine in the East may be premature, it is Sudan's poorest region and Post will continue to monitor the situation closely.

FERNANDEZ